

## **The RAAF's final involvement in the Vietnam War: The fall of Saigon**

The Paris Agreement of 27 January 1973 intended to bring "peace with honour" to South Vietnam. A cease-fire commenced and all foreign troops were withdrawn. Australia's last combat troops had left on 18 December 72, and only a small Embassy Guard Platoon remained, until 30 June 73.

Under provisions of the Agreement, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces were allowed to remain in their positions in South Vietnam. Consequently, the day before the Agreement came into effect, communist forces battled to gain as much territory as possible. The day after, South Vietnamese troops fought to regain their lost ground. The cease-fire was broken. Clashes between North and South Vietnam continued, and the North launched a major offensive, with an assault on the highlands town of Ban Me Thuot, on 10 March 1975. Their victory was swift, and so began the communist advance towards Saigon.

On 29 March 1975 the Australian government responded to an urgent request for assistance from the government of South Vietnam by hastily dispatching RAAF aircraft and support personnel on a humanitarian relief mission.

Eight Hercules transports from RAAF Base Richmond, NSW, (the contingent later designated 'Headquarters Richmond Detachment S'), and two Dakotas from Transport Support Flight Butterworth, Malaysia, were allotted the task of evacuating civilian refugees from the city of Da Nang, which was directly in the path of advancing communist forces. However, conditions in Vietnam were changing so rapidly that Da Nang fell to the communists on 31 March, before the RAAF could be utilized.

The first successful mission was conducted on 02 April, when, amid scenes of panic and chaos, some 1,500 to 1,800 refugees and Red Cross supplies were moved from Phan Rang to Can Tho. However, Phan Rang fell the next day, and Prime Minister Gough Whitlam personally approved other tasks. On 04 and 17 April, war orphans were evacuated from Saigon to Bangkok as part of 'Operation Baby-lift'. Most other missions involved the transport of relief supplies and equipment from Saigon to An Thoi, on the Island of Phu Quoc, to assist the South Vietnamese government in establishing a camp for the tens of thousands of refugees desperately fleeing the communist advance.

On the 17 April, with the situation in Saigon rapidly deteriorating, and the risk becoming greater, the decision was made to transfer the entire RAAF contingent to Bangkok. From there, aircraft operated into Saigon to conduct their missions as required. On 25 April 1975, Ambassador Geoffrey Price received the message to evacuate the Australian Embassy. Two Hercules aircraft were loaded with Australian government personnel, their belongings and equipment. Four RAAF Airfield Defence Guards had been assigned to protect the operation, and were given orders "not to allow any Vietnamese onto the aircraft". As the two Hercules were readied for departure, it was found there was no space remaining for the four ADGs. They were each handed a pistol, with four rounds of ammunition, and orders to wait for another aircraft. The ADGs were left, stranded on the tarmac at Tan Son Nhut, without any food, water or means of radio communication.

Not only did these men fear for their safety from mortar and rocket attacks on the airport, but they were physically threatened by aggressive, heavily armed South Vietnamese soldiers who were irate at being deserted by their one-time ally. Fortunately, another Hercules had been on standby, and several hours later, arrived to rescue the ADGs. Thus ended Australia's final involvement in the Vietnam War.

'Headquarters Richmond Detachment S' had totalled up to 200 RAAF personnel, including air and ground crews, equipment and administration personnel, Nursing Sisters, and other medical staff. However, it was four RAAF ADGs who became the last Australian servicemen to leave South Vietnam. It was ANZAC Day 1975.

Five days later, North Vietnamese tanks crashed through the gates of Saigon's Presidential Palace, forcing unconditional surrender of the Government of South Vietnam. Finally, the Vietnam War was over.

Information supplied by:  
Brendan Lynch  
RAAFVVA